



Reframing teachers' role in post-conflict and crisis-affected contexts

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This introduction to the special issue on teachers in post-conflict and crisis-affected contexts examines the roles, identities, and pedagogical practices of ELT professionals working in environments where instability, displacement, and violence profoundly reshape educational realities. Moving beyond policy-centred accounts, it foregrounds teachers' lived experiences, highlighting how ELT practitioners function as multidimensional agents who combine language instruction with trauma-sensitive care, peacebuilding, and community stabilisation. The article conceptualises teacher identity and well-being as ecological and relational, shaped by systemic precarity, emotional labour, and limited institutional support. It further illustrates how context-responsive and politically charged pedagogies transform ELT classrooms into spaces of psychological safety, critical dialogue, and collective coping. The article argues for a shift away from reliance on individual teacher resilience towards coordinated professional development, policy reform, and systemic support. By centring teachers' agency and expertise, it offers insights for stakeholders concerned with sustaining education and social recovery in contexts of crisis.

Key words: teachers in conflict settings, crisis-affected contexts, post-conflict contexts, peace education, trauma-sensitive education

Introduction

The contemporary educational landscape is increasingly shaped by instability, requiring thousands of ELT professionals to work within disrupted learning environments while confronting the profound effects of forced migration, displacement, political violence, protracted insecurity, natural disasters, and other forms of crisis and adversity. In these contexts, the teacher's role expands far beyond linguistic instruction; they are routinely tasked with implementing trauma-sensitive teaching and socio-emotional

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learning (SEL) approaches, often while contending with profound resource disparities and institutional inequities. This work is pivotal for maintaining learning continuity and supporting community healing, yet it is typically carried out unguided and unsupported, highlighting a critical deficiency in both policy and practical guidance. For the purposes of this special issue, we define post-conflict contexts as communities transitioning from violence or instability towards peace and recovery. Further, we understand crisis-affected contexts as environments where armed conflict, environmental disasters, economic instability, health emergencies, displacement, forced migration, and other acute disruptions are taking or have taken place.

Historically, ELT research in post-conflict and crisis-affected settings has remained fragmented, with much of the existing literature focusing on high-level and static education policy rather than the complex, nuanced on-the-ground realities faced by practitioners. In particular, there has been limited sustained attention to teachers' own voices, longitudinal understandings of teacher well-being, and the real-life conditions and constraints shaping everyday pedagogical practice in protracted crisis settings. To adequately support and recognize these frontline educators, a fundamental shift is required: moving away from a perspective that assumes basic safety and stability towards one that acknowledges and addresses the systemic precarity defining their professional lives.

This special issue aims to bridge this critical gap by offering fresh insights into the agency, resilience, and adaptability of ELT teachers in crisis contexts. By amplifying voices and experiences from diverse environments, the collection challenges the normative framing of the ELT classroom. It champions the notion that in times of crisis, the linguistic landscape and pedagogical choices are actively utilized to support resilience, well-being, and pedagogical transformation. The contributions collected here serve as a foundational resource, providing evidence-based solutions for practitioners, teacher educators, and policymakers, thereby contributing valuable, practical strategies to the rapidly evolving ELT field.

The remaining sections of this introductory article will establish the central arguments of this special issue, providing a framework for the contributions that follow. We first explore the reconfigured identity of the teacher, arguing that they function as multidimensional agents whose well-being is defined by the ecological constraints of their environment. This is followed by an analysis of frontline pedagogy, detailing the context-responsive, trauma-sensitive, and politically charged classroom practices enacted under duress. Finally, we address the systemic imperative, outlining the urgent need for integrated policy, training, and support structures to sustain the

educators who are themselves indispensable agents of recovery and reconstruction.

Redefining the teacher's role and identity

In environments defined by conflict and crisis, the identity of English language teachers undergoes a radical, non-linear transformation. The core function shifts from the mere technical delivery of curriculum to the profoundly human task of social reconstruction and care. Falk (2023) maintains that for teachers working amidst protracted conflict and displacement, professional identity is multidimensional, contextual, and temporal, profoundly shaped by life histories that extend well beyond the classroom. Teachers sustain a deep commitment to learners despite the persistent paradox where education is highly valued while teachers and the teaching career are systematically devalued. This inherent tension between immense personal commitment and systemic lack of recognition is the bedrock upon which the crisis-affected teacher's identity is constructed.

One of the most visible transformations in post-conflict and crisis-affected contexts is the expansion of teachers' functional roles. As Adebayo (2019) demonstrates, teachers enact agency not merely as curriculum implementers but as caregivers, humanitarians, peacebuilders, and providers of psychosocial support. Crises necessitate a fundamental shift from curriculum delivery to learning design, requiring teachers to rapidly restructure pedagogical practices in response to learners' physical, emotional, and contextual instability. In such settings, teachers often emerge as frontline peacebuilders whose work extends beyond language instruction to include trauma mediation, reconciliation, and the cultivation of social trust within fractured communities (Shinjashvili and Akhaladze 2025).

Importantly, teachers in contexts scarred by violence are not neutral conduits of content but conflict-affected individuals whose subjectivities and lived experiences profoundly shape their peacebuilding practices (Clarke-Habibi 2018). While educating for peace can foster personal healing and professional transformation, it simultaneously exposes teachers to heightened social-emotional strain and political risk. This duality highlights the need to view teachers as peace learners rather than as detached facilitators alone. In this sense, peace learning is not confined to students; it is an experiential, reflexive process through which teachers grapple with unresolved trauma, moral ambiguity, intergroup mistrust, and competing narratives of justice and reconciliation. Indeed, teachers' understandings of democracy and civic education are often forged through post-conflict lived experience rather than institutional stability, just as their capacity to sustain effective teaching during crisis depends on psychological resources activated and intensified under conditions of disruption.

This shift in identity carries a heavy emotional and ethical burden. The teacher is caught between strong moral commitments to social repair and the demotivating structural realities of weak institutional support and post-crisis instability (Adebayo 2019). The ethical tension is amplified in

politically contested areas, especially when teachers in ethnically divided societies hold personal biases that reflect common societal stereotypes, even as they strive to keep those biases from influencing their classroom practice. In such contexts, teachers consciously regulate their behaviour, framing professionalism as a moral obligation to act as role models rather than political actors. This is the identity paradox: teachers are expected to be neutral professionals while being simultaneously required to perform expanded, social, and emotionally charged roles as a stabilizing, humanizing force within the conflict zone, all while working within a profession widely understood as a political act in itself. The recognition of this complexity—the teacher as a crisis-affected individual whose identity is both a resource and a vulnerability—is what unifies the contributions in this special issue. At the same time, this expanded framing carries significant risks, including boundary erosion, safeguarding concerns, and secondary trauma, and must not be allowed to normalise teachers as substitutes for absent psychosocial and social services (Pentón Herrera and Daragh 2024).

The ecology of well-being and emotional labour

If the crisis context redefines the teacher's identity, it simultaneously imposes a profound and often invisible cost, making the discussion of well-being an ethical imperative. Well-being in these settings cannot be understood as an individual attribute but must be framed as an ecological and multidimensional construct shaped by the intricate interplay of economic, psychosocial, professional, and political constraints (Veronese *et al.* 2018). While teaching remains a vital source of moral purpose, the chronic insecurity, low pay, restricted mobility, and emotional strain typical of post-conflict settings profoundly undermine physical, psychological, and professional health. This ecological perspective is essential for moving beyond individualizing the problem and recognizing the systemic failures that endanger those tasked with educational continuity.

A central theme unifying the experience of these educators is the paradoxical nature of care. Falk, Shephard, and Mendenhall (2022) demonstrate that in displacement-affected contexts, teachers' close relational bonds with students simultaneously become the primary source of their purpose and their most intense source of strain. While adopting counsellor-like roles strengthens their professional identity and nation-building commitment, these very responsibilities intensify emotional labour, stress, and feelings of inadequacy, particularly when they lack the resources to meet learners' profound needs. This dynamic is exacerbated by what Warner and Diao (2022) term 'caring as pedagogy', where language teachers are subjected to institutionalized feeling rules, expected to maintain community and provide emotional support well beyond curricular goals, often without institutional recognition. The emotional exhaustion derived from this mandatory, unacknowledged labour underscores the urgency of addressing teacher mental health provisions.

Furthermore, the experience of teaching in unstable contexts frequently generates sustained emotional fatigue, fundamentally reshaping conventional understandings of self-care. Crisis radically alters the conditions of teaching, intensifying pedagogical uncertainty and demanding continuous

negotiation, such that personal and professional self-care becomes a condition of survival and ethical practice rather than an individual choice. This reframing aligns with [Pentón Herrera and Darragh' \(2024\)](#) concept of responsible well-being, which challenges notions of teacher wellness as an individual burden by positioning well-being as a shared ethical responsibility that extends to institutions, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Grounded in principles of equity, access, and sustainability, responsible well-being foregrounds the need for systems that support holistic fulfillment, professional agency, meaningful connections, and adaptive institutional responses. When such structures are absent, the burden of systemic failure is transferred directly onto teachers, compelling them to rely on their personal resources to cope with the compounded social, emotional, and pedagogical demands of crisis-affected classrooms.

In light of this pervasive toll, resilience must be reframed not as an innate individual trait but as a proactive, cultivated pedagogical process that foregrounds teachers' active roles in sustaining learning and stability amid prolonged crisis. By conceptualising resilience as a central pedagogical action, the focus shifts from assessing individual hardiness to recognising the shared responsibility of institutions, communities, and wider society in creating the conditions that enable teaching practices to foster psychosocial stability for both students and teachers. This necessary shift moves the discussion towards systemic accountability, arguing that to sustain teaching in contexts of adversity, teacher roles and preparation must fundamentally move beyond curriculum delivery towards protection, care, and resilience-building ([Nordtveit 2016](#)). When teachers lack training in psychosocial support and trauma-sensitive pedagogy, schools risk becoming sites of harm; conversely, reframing teachers as protective mediators can transform schools into crucial buffers against structural violence and insecurity.

Context-responsive pedagogy

In conditions of extreme material scarcity and psycho-affective distress, pedagogical decisions are necessarily governed by viability, care, and survival, often superseding strict curricular compliance. For instance, [Alyasin \(2015\)](#) details how a Syrian English teacher in a refugee camp adopted an exam-oriented focus on grammar, vocabulary, and translation. While seemingly traditional, this approach emerged as a pragmatic survival pedagogy: it provided continuity, established a sense of familiar routine, and offered students a tangible, goal-oriented focus that countered the pervasive uncertainty of interrupted schooling. This contextual responsiveness—the ability to create normalcy and emotionally safe learning spaces amid extreme disruption—positions ELT teachers as crucial agents of stability. In such circumstances, teachers are constantly redesigning curricula for flexible delivery, expanding their digital repertoires, and reconfiguring their professional identities to sustain learning and well-being.

A defining feature of context-responsive pedagogy is the incorporation of trauma-sensitive approaches that prioritize psychological safety and emotional recovery. In crisis-affected settings, teachers are often at the

forefront of implementing these approaches, and their application within ELT classrooms has proven particularly impactful. Integrating arts-based activities such as drawing, role-play, and storytelling, for instance, can create non-threatening and emotionally supportive learning environments that simultaneously foster language development and facilitate emotional recovery in contexts marked by trauma and disruption. Similarly, [Rybinska et al. \(2023\)](#) show that teaching English during wartime in Ukraine requires trauma-sensitive practices, characterized by emotional validation, reduced cognitive load, and flexible online delivery, to sustain language learning while actively supporting students' psychological resilience. These practices signal a shift in instructional purpose, whereby ELT extends beyond linguistic competence to function as a site of collective coping, emotional regulation, and psychological stabilization.

Conflict-affected pedagogy could, thus, be considered intrinsically political, compelling teachers to operate as mediators of identity, memory, and reconciliation within deeply fractured social landscapes. In such contexts, the ELT classroom frequently becomes a site where educators must navigate entrenched sociopolitical fault lines, positioning language teachers as frontline mediators who strategically use pedagogy to de-escalate hostility, foster intercultural dialogue, and rehumanize the former enemy. This work is profoundly ethical and fraught with political risk. Within this volatile environment, how contentious issues are taught becomes critical. By deliberately structuring dialogue, dissensus, and critical reflection, teachers move beyond passive curriculum enactment to assume the role of transformative educators, enabling learners to engage with unresolved social inequalities and to envision themselves as agents of social change. These practices reposition ELT beyond mere language instruction, foregrounding its potential as a powerful vehicle for critical consciousness, ethical engagement, and post-conflict societal rebuilding.

Systemic support, professionalization, and policy

The work teachers undertake in post-conflict and crisis-affected contexts, including sustained emotional labour, pedagogical innovation, and the ongoing reconfiguration of professional identity, is frequently carried out under conditions of limited guidance and support, revealing a critical gap between the expansive expectations placed on teachers and the structures available to sustain them. This systemic failure is particularly pronounced for those teachers in protracted crisis settings, who occupy precarious professional positions marked by limited training, weak recognition, and heavy psychosocial demands ([Mendenhall 2018](#)). The core challenge for the field, therefore, is to transition from relying on the improvised resilience of the individual teacher to establishing structured, systemic support that validates their expertise and secures their professional future. This requires a fundamental overhaul of how professional development (PD), mentoring, and policy frameworks are conceptualized and enacted.

Traditional PD models, characterized by standardized, decontextualized, top-down instruction, are fundamentally ill-suited for the dynamic, highly contextualized reality of crisis-affected ELT. The challenges of limited mobility, linguistic diversity, and technological barriers necessitate innovative and participatory approaches. [Pherali et al. \(2025\)](#) argue that PD in

contexts of mass displacement must move beyond simple online provision towards co-designed, dialogic, and connected learning models. Their work with refugee and migrant teachers in Lebanon and along the Thai–Myanmar border demonstrates that such models are successful because they enable teachers to share situated knowledge, address barriers collaboratively, and exercise professional agency. This peer-driven, localized approach contrasts sharply with conventional models, reinforcing the principle that effective learning for crisis educators must be collaborative and empowering. Similarly, [Mendenhall \(2018\)](#) highlights the success of participatory, teacher-centred PD that combines training, peer coaching, and mobile mentoring to strengthen identity and well-being in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. This shift in methodology is essential for transforming PD from a compliance exercise into a meaningful source of professional empowerment and support.

During periods of intense instability, formal support structures often fracture, compelling teachers to actively seek out and construct alternative, more agile networks. Research shows that e-mentoring, for example, frequently enabled avoidant mentor behaviours and weakened relational support during the COVID-19 crisis. In response, teachers actively compensated through peer and reverse mentoring, forging crucial non-hierarchical support networks vital for teacher well-being and professional survival in high-stress contexts ([Haidusek-Niazy, Huyler, and Carpenter 2023](#)). This points to the imperative of fostering communities of practice that are grounded in shared experience. The counterpoint is found in cases of novice EFL teachers in post-conflict contexts who enter the profession under conditions that actively preclude the formation of supportive professional communities, leaving them isolated, underconfident, and compelled to construct their professional identities without collegial support. The lesson is clear: communities, societies, and institutions must not only tolerate but also actively cultivate these relational, non-hierarchical support structures that teachers naturally rely on during a crisis.

Sustaining learning continuity in crisis contexts—whether amid pandemics, conflict, or natural disasters—is dependent on teachers’ capacity to rapidly redesign pedagogy, but this capacity must be buttressed by systemic teacher support and coordinated policy responses to prevent widening educational inequities. The responsibility for moving education systems from chaos to continuity rests with coordinated action at societal and institutional macro levels, not simply individual heroism ([Affouneh and Burgos 2021](#)). System-level action plans that position teachers as central agents but ensure their effectiveness through structured support might include elements like psychosocial first aid, appropriate digital tools, continuous monitoring, and forward-looking reform ([Affouneh and Burgos 2021](#)). Such a plan emphasizes that crisis-responsive teaching requires deliberate support rather than improvised resilience alone.

This societal and institutional commitment extends directly to teacher education and policy reform. Teacher education programmes must move beyond technical instruction to foreground critical reflection, intercultural engagement, and transformative pedagogy. By embedding a focus on

Overview of special issue contributions

critical consciousness, training can help future ELT teachers envision themselves as inclusive educators and agents of social change. Most importantly, the ultimate goal must be to address the systemic devaluation of teachers in precarious positions, ensuring that they receive sustained policy reform that supports their rights, recognition, and working conditions (Mendenhall 2018). By implementing these coordinated strategies, the field can finally bridge the significant gap in practical guidance and honour the vital commitment demonstrated by frontline ELT professionals.

The articles in this special issue trace a conceptual and pedagogical arc that moves from teachers' lived experiences of conflict, precarity, and emotional strain to classroom-level responses and, ultimately, to generative possibilities for dialogue, resilience, and peacebuilding through ELT. Taken together, they foreground teachers not as neutral implementers of policy, but as conflict-affected professionals whose identities, agency, and well-being are deeply entangled with crisis conditions. The contributions begin by examining how prolonged instability reshapes teachers' sense of self and professional agency, before turning to the emotional and psychological labour that persists in post-crisis environments. The later articles focus more closely on trauma-sensitive and context-responsive pedagogies, illustrating how ELT classrooms function as spaces of care, coping, and resilience for both teachers and learners. The section concludes with studies that highlight innovative, dialogic, and activist pedagogies, pointing towards ELT's potential to foster connection, mutual understanding, and social repair in deeply divided contexts.

The special issue opens with a deeply reflexive account that foregrounds how conflict, migration, and structural precarity shape teachers' identities and constrain their capacity for critical agency across teaching contexts. Basarati presents an autoethnographic account tracing his experiences as an English teacher in Iran and later as a migrant educator in Poland. The article shows how economic instability, institutional control, and job insecurity compel the suppression of critical pedagogical action. The study highlights how trauma and fear of professional vulnerability can persist across contexts, reshaping teachers' identities and leading to more cautious, compliance-oriented practices in post-conflict settings.

Extending this focus on teacher subjectivity, Colombo-Gomes examines how emotional labour continues to shape the professional lives of Brazilian English language teachers in the post-crisis aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on questionnaire data and narrative accounts, the article shows that teachers remain affected by distress, anxiety, and apathy years after the crisis, largely linked to heightened educational inequality and the enduring consequences of emergency remote teaching in higher education. The study highlights the long-term emotional impact of crisis conditions on ELT practitioners and underscores the need to foreground resilience and well-being in teacher education and professional practice.

Shifting from prolonged emotional aftermaths to acute disruption, Bentahar, Elmeski, and Pentón Herrera's study explores the experiences of Moroccan secondary-school EFL teachers during and after the 2023 AI

Haouz earthquake, focusing on how educators navigated professional responsibilities amid large-scale trauma and disruption. Drawing on quantitative data, the study highlights teachers' strong resilience while also revealing significant gaps in psychological and institutional support that constrained their capacity to support students and the wider community. The authors show how these limitations shaped ELT practices both inside and beyond the classroom in the post-disaster context.

Focusing on classroom-level practice, Sichka, Darragh, and Petrie report on an action research study examining trauma-sensitive English teaching during the ongoing war in Ukraine. Focusing on classroom activities grounded in SEL and resilience building, the article shows that students valued pedagogical approaches that fostered emotional connection, engagement, and opportunities for language use, even while grappling with the limits of their linguistic resources. The findings highlight how trauma-sensitive ELT can function simultaneously as a space for language development, emotional support, and collective coping in wartime conditions.

Broadening the lens beyond armed conflict, Dovchin explores how English teachers working with displaced nomadic herders' children in Mongolia respond to the educational and emotional consequences of displacement caused by mining-related disruption. Drawing on teacher interviews, the article shows how ELT practitioners address trauma, cultural dislocation, and fragmented schooling through trauma-informed and context-sensitive pedagogies, despite severe resource constraints. The study positions ELT as both a site of crisis and possibility, highlighting teachers' roles in fostering resilience, hope, and continuity for displaced learners.

The special issue then turns towards more generative pedagogical possibilities. Rafi examines how the July Revolution in Bangladesh reshaped ELT pedagogy by bringing youth-led political activism into the language classroom. Drawing on multimodal data and translanguaging and trans-semiotic frameworks, the article shows how revolutionary artefacts such as graffiti and slogans can be repurposed as pedagogical resources that resonate with Generation Z learners. The study highlights the potential of context-sensitive ELT practices to foster engagement, peacebuilding, and meaningful learning in crisis-affected educational environments.

The special issue concludes with an account of pedagogical activism. Yitzhaki and Schvarcz analyse two ELT initiatives in Israel that use linguistic landscape pedagogy to promote dialogue and joint learning between Jewish and Arab communities in a context of protracted conflict. Focusing on teacher-designed projects and collaborative student encounters across segregated school systems, the article shows how engaging critically with linguistic landscapes enables learners to examine competing cultural narratives and develop mutual understanding. The authors demonstrate that linguistic landscape pedagogy can function as a form of pedagogical activism, creating structured opportunities for contact, dialogue, and bridge-building amid ongoing political tension.

Conclusion

This special issue represents a crucial pivot in ELT research. By presenting evidence across varied geopolitical contexts, the collection moves decisively beyond fragmented policy analysis to foreground the complex, human dimension of education in some of the world's most challenging environments. The central message is clear: teachers in crisis contexts are skilled, multifaceted professionals whose role as a language instructor is inseparable from their function as a social stabilizer, a trauma mediator, and an essential agent of community reconstruction.

We have established that the crisis environment demands a fundamental redefinition of teacher identity, one that embraces the ethical burden of care and the strategic necessity of context-responsive agency. Teachers are operating within an ecological and multidimensional reality where the emotional labour of providing psychosocial support often risks personal and professional burnout (Veronese *et al.* 2018). Yet, simultaneously, they demonstrate profound adaptability, transforming their classroom practices into active forms of resilience. The articles in this special issue offer compelling evidence of the resulting innovative responses. The classroom, therefore, emerges as the single most vital space for creating safety, continuity, and the complex, contested foundations of future peace.

The collective findings of this special issue serve as an urgent call for systemic accountability. The pervasive observation that this vital work is typically carried out unguided and unsupported constitutes a systemic failure. As we have highlighted, effective crisis-responsive teaching requires transitioning from reliance on individual grit to the provision of responsible well-being (Pentón Herrera and Darragh 2024), coordinated institutional decisions, robust support networks (Haidusek-Niazy, Huylar, and Carpenter 2023), and participatory, co-designed professional development (Pherali *et al.* 2025).

In conclusion, this special issue offers a foundational resource for policy-makers, teacher trainers, and researchers, advocating for a necessary ethical investment in the teaching workforce. By validating the lived experiences, agency, and profound professionalism of ELT practitioners, the collection successfully bridges the gap between theory and practice, offering evidence-based solutions. The path towards post-conflict reconstruction and societal healing is intrinsically linked to the supported teacher. The ultimate goal is to ensure that policymakers enact stronger teacher education initiatives, mental health provisions, and inclusive learning opportunities to secure the vital role that frontline educators play as agents of hope and renewal in a fractured world.

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